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JACK ANDERSON

Mexico Protests Recent Reports On Corruption

My recent reports on corruption in Mexico stirred a hornet's nest south of the border. The Mexican government lodged a formal diplomatic protest, which led the State Department to issue a delicately worded quasi-apology.

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.) was even moved to suggest that my reports were the result of deliberate leaks from elements in the Reagan administration trying to discredit President Miguel de la Madrid during his state visit to Washington last month.

All this is preposterous. My associate Dale Van Atta had been digging up the facts on Mexican presidents' self-enrichment for months. I had the essential information late last year and spent the ensuing months confirming it. De la Madrid's visit was simply a convenient news peg for the stories.

The particular hornet that stung de la Madrid was my report from secret sources that the Mexican president had squirreled away some \$162 million since he took office in 1982. I noted that this was a modest sum compared with the \$1 billion to

\$3 billion stashed away by his predecessor and mentor, Jose Lopez Portillo, during his six-year term.

The first word most Mexicans had of the alleged self-enrichment of their president came when his denial was issued. Except for a few courageous editors, the story was ignored by the Mexican press. So when the formal protest was lodged, most newspapers were in the awkward position of having to explain what their president was protesting.

The protest presented a special problem for the State Department. This is spelled out in a secret department report that explained:

"Our problems with Mexico differ in nature and scale from those with any other country. Other nations' problems affect us. Mexican problems involve us . . . Mexico joins the short list of countries needing special treatment. Because it is large, poor, very close and separated by a permeable border, and because its population already exceeds its resources and is growing too fast, Mexico's problems will increasingly be ours."

So the State Department's response to de la Madrid's protest was a carefully worded peace offering. It said:

"The United States government applauds President de la Madrid's commitment to addressing the issue of honesty in government. Information available to all U.S. government

agencies leads us to the firm conclusion that President de la Madrid has set both a high personal and official standard in keeping with this commitment."

This is clearly not a denial of the facts I had presented, though the Mexican press treated it as such.

Since my columns appeared, much has been written about de la Madrid's anti-corruption campaign. As I pointed out, it has become a Mexican tradition for each incoming administration to investigate the corruption of the outgoing administration, with an accompanying hullabaloo about reforms.

These investigations invariably stop short of the retired president. There seems to be a special immunity for ex-presidents, an unspoken understanding that the current president will treat his predecessors as he would like one day to be treated. One reason for this may be that the new president almost always was a close ally of the last president.

For example, no one bothers to pretend any longer that corruption was not rampant under ex-President Lopez Portillo. But as usual, Lopez Portillo and de la Madrid have escaped the scourging applied to lesser lights. The Mexican press has neglected to remind Mexicans that Lopez Portillo's budget director—the man who knew as much as anyone where the money was going—was none other than de la Madrid.